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ABSTRACT

This digest is intended to provide basic information on homeschooling for parents of gifted children considering this option. Challenges and opportunities of home schooling are identified and include a large time commitment, expenses of educational resources, flexibility in providing the student with academic challenges, social considerations (offers suggestions for meeting social needs) and legal considerations (notes variations in specific state requirements regarding homeschooling). The paper briefly describes different approaches to homeschooling, resources available to develop or assess the quality of a homeschool curriculum, data on the academic performance of homeschoolers, planning for college, and sources of other information on homeschooling. Contains 11 references. (DB)

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Homeschooling Gifted Students: An Introductory Guide for Parents

Jacque Ensign

During the last 20 years, increasing numbers of families in the United States have chosen to educate their children at home or outside the conventional school environment. Current estimates range from 500,000 to 1.2 million students (Lines, 1991, 1995; Ray, 1996). Of that number, a significant percentage of families have chosen homeschooling as the educational option for their gifted children.

Challenges and opportunities

When families consider homeschooling, there are many issues to explore.

Time commitment. Homeschooling requires an enormous time commitment by at least one parent. However, many parents of highly gifted children are already actively committed to their children's education. Parents find themselves trying to squeeze in extra hours for music, dance, and art. Frequently, evenings are spent enriching the classroom curriculum so their children will continue to be academically challenged. These parents claim that homeschooling is a way to tailor their children's education to specific needs and interests at the appropriate academic challenge level, and to create an integrated educational environment that includes a wide range of activities.

Talk together as a family to decide if this is the appropriate choice for you. As with any educational option, homeschooling works better for some students and parents than for others. Some find the demands and intensity of homeschooling to be too stressful; others love the freedom and challenge.

Resources and financial considerations. Homeschooling parents use many resources and materials. These can become expensive, but there are ways to defray some of the costs. Homeschooling parents can borrow from each other, share resources, and make use of common items in the house and natural environments for curriculum material. The public library is a rich resource for books and videos. Many libraries offer interlibrary loans and vacation-loan extensions to the public. The Internet offers a wealth of highly sophisticated information, especially in the academic subject areas. A computer in the house is an advantage, but there are other ways to gain access to the Internet; for example, some public libraries and schools offer access.

When considering homeschooling, explore resources and materials in advance. At all levels, verify the type of support schools will provide. If they have a gifted program, they may provide curriculum suggestions and guidelines. Contact others who are homeschooling through your state's homeschooling network.

Academic considerations. Homeschooling can offer increased flexibility and academic challenge. Flexibility is particularly important since many gifted students are uneven in their abilities. For example, a child may be several years ahead in math, but struggling with reading or writing.

Some children excel in all areas and require academic challenges to remain motivated in school. Many of these students sit idly, waiting for the class to catch up (U.S. Department of Education, 1994b). A rigorous, academically challenging curriculum offers the opportunity to insert depth and breadth. For example, the use of primary or original sources and advanced reading material may lead the gifted learner into critical thinking about an academic subject area or an interdisciplinary approach to subject matter. Projects, hands-on learning, and problem-based learning may provide interesting approaches to academic content.

Gifted homeschoolers enjoy opportunities to develop in multifaceted ways and pursue interests without time and curriculum constraints. Individual learning, tutorials, and small group classes are some of the options.

Social considerations. Many people have expressed concern about the social life and potential isolation of homeschooled children. Studies of social adjustment and

selected list of competitions and activities can be obtained for a fee from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

How well do homeschoolers perform?

One way to compare homeschooled students with peers who attend public schools is to use standardized achievement test scores. A study of homeschooled student scores on standardized achievement tests shows higher scores than the general population (National Home Education Research Institute, 1997). Galloway (1995) investigated homeschooled graduates' potential for success in college by comparing their performance with students from conventional schools and found insignificant differences, except in the ACT English subtest scores. Homeschooled students earned higher scores in that subtest.

What about college?

The later high school years should be structured with college applications in mind. These years may be managed in a variety of ways. Some students remain in homeschooling and receive no diploma. Others choose to reenter public school during high school to align themselves with peers and obtain a standard diploma. Others select a combination that will take advantage of Advanced Placement courses or other academic and extracurricular offerings.

Limited research suggests that the home educated do well in college (Sutton & de Oliveira, 1995; Galloway, & Sutton, 1995). Furthermore, homeschoolers may find the unique experiences and abilities gained through homeschooling make them attractive to competitive colleges. Check with the colleges of interest to determine if they have specific application requirements for homeschoolers. When standard high school student transcripts are not available, colleges may need other information to make an informed decision. SAT scores may be given more weight, since they are a way of comparing a homeschooler to the general college-bound population. Transcripts from community college courses taken during high school years can be useful. Letters of recommendation from persons who have worked with the homeschooler in tutorials, apprenticeships, community service, and social activities may prove very valuable. A detailed description of unique homeschool courses, in-depth independent projects, competitions, publications, and community service activities will help a college understand the quality of an applicant's homeschool education and recognize the student as a competitive applicant. An interview, when offered by a college or university, is particularly important for homeschool applicants.

Where can families get information?

This digest has an accompanying bibliography (EB18) that provides a wide variety of resources. The following resources and others cited in their bibliographies are another place to start. There are many parent discussion groups on the Internet that discuss homeschooling issues. Groups such as TAGFAM and TAG-L are listed on the ERIC EC website <http://www.cec.sped.org/gifted/gt-menu.htm>. Or, seek out a local homeschool support group. You can find one by checking with state organizations listed in some of the magazines and through some of the Internet sites listed in EB 18. Other sources include libraries; state and local boards of education, especially state or local gifted advocacy groups; La Leche League; and religious organizations. Be sure to look for groups that match the underlying philosophy that attracted you to homeschooling.

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